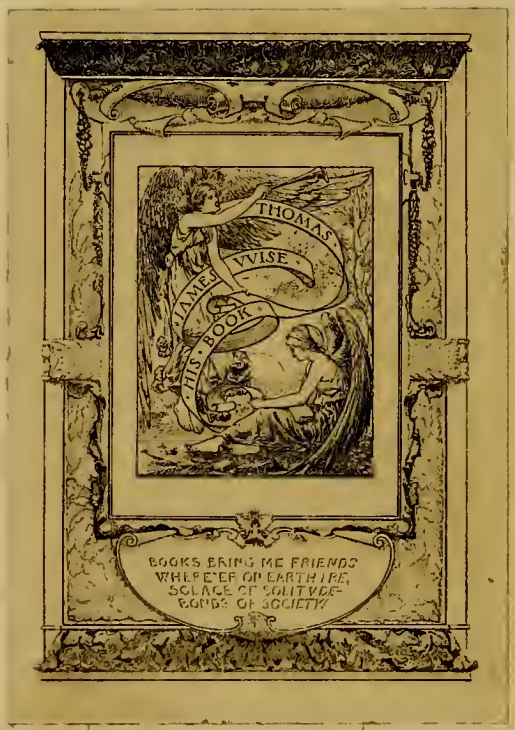
THOMAS
JAMES
VVISE
HIS BOOK
BOOKS BRING ME FRIENDS
WHEREVER ON EARTH I ARE,
SOLACE OF SOLITVDE
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THE
THORNY PATH
OF
LITERATURE

THE THORNY PATH OF LITERATURE

BY

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WILLIAM E. A. AXON

INTRODUCTION

OLD and obscure periodicals are something of a Tom Tiddler's ground where amidst rubbish heaps there are occasional pieces of the gold and silver of literature to be picked up. The "Sunbeam" is an unknown weekly magazine. Its first number is dated for Saturday, February 3rd, 1838; its last issue was that for December 28th, 1839. These 100 numbers make two volumes, and, with title pages and indexes, were published "complete in one volume, £1 8s. Devoted to science, literature, and music," each number had an original piece of music, some of them by well-known composers. In the last volume of the "Sunbeam" there is an announcement that it would be continued in a new and improved series as the "Sylph," but whether this ever came out I know not. Neither "Sunbeam" nor "Sylph" is in the British Museum catalogue of periodicals.

The unknown editor was a great admirer of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and this may have induced Mr. Thomas Curnick, of Bristol, to send him in 1838 a letter he had received from the poet in 1814. Mr. Curnick was a worshipper, though not, it may be feared, a priest of the Muses, and not satisfied with the opinions, or lack of opinions, of "his Boeotian friends" about his verses he sent to S. T. C. a copy of an "Ode on the Victories obtained by the Allied Armies under the command of Lord Wellington," and with it a letter in which "a young and ardent mind naturally enough freely indulged its observations on the chilling and destructive apathy with which metrical compositions were generally regarded. To understand the reply of S. T. C. it is necessary to quote some verse from this production:—

> Then tune, sweet lyre! to Wellington thy string;
> To Wellington thy warbling accents raise,
> For say of whom more glorious canst thou sing,
> What mightier hero praise,
> Than he whose powerful hand
> Supports the tott'ring domes of freedom's state
> Inwreathed with victory see him stand,
> And hurl upon his foes inevitable fate!

INTRODUCTION

On the auspicious hour that gave thee birth,
Britannic Mars! rejoiciog nature smil'd;
Cherubic forms declar'd thy future worth,
And mark'd thee conq'ror in the dreadful field.
Bright honour wove a chaplet for thy brow;
Justice thy manly bosom sway'd;
While, like the moon, thy acts conspicuous grow,
Till to the full they rise in majesty array'd.

Hark! the brazen trumpet swells;
See where the god in terror rolls his car;
Swift as a wintry flood its course impels,
The rattling wheels resound and thunder through the war.
Mark his helm and pond'rous spear;
Mark how his falchion fires the dusky air;
His steeds with meteor names and eyes that wildly glare!

'Tis past—the fiend of slaughter flies;
In murmurs low the clam'rous battle dies;
As distant billows from the shore recede;
And hear what strains harmonious rise—
Strains which alone from seraph harps proceed,
Expaosive through the skies.
Peace, behold! on downy wings descending;
Unnumber'd joys her heavenly form attending;
Her accents every grief assuage,
And calm the dauntless warrior's rage.

Two volumes are known from the pen of Curnick. One is "Jehosaphat, with other poems," printed at Bristol in 1815, and the other is "De Eloquentia Sacra," a poem, to which is prefixed a translation of George Buchanan's "Hymnus Matutinus ad Christum," issued at the same place in 1825. Years had perhaps tamed Mr. Curnick's Muse, for he writes: "As to the ode, the experience of the realities of life during the last quarter of a century has quite eradicated

any morbid sensibility in my mind, either as to the censure or the approbation with which it may now be read."

When Coleridge wrote this letter he was in Bristol on a lecturing expedition, which does not appear to have been very successful. His discourses on Milton were "indifferently attended." The poet was not in good physical condition. "An erysipelatous complaint," he writes to Cottle, "of an alarming nature has rendered me barely able to attend and go through with my lectures, the receipts of which have almost paid the expenses of the room, advertisements, &c. Whether this be to my discredit or to that of the good citizens of Bristol it is not for me to judge." His statement that "Milton had represented Satan as a Skeptical Socinism" gave offence to Estlin, and certainly came with bad grace from one who at an earlier period was a willing preacher of Unitarianism. To this visit, too, belongs the painful correspondence with Cottle, who had only then discovered the enormous extent to which Coleridge was using—or misusing—opium. To Cottle's faithful remonstrances and reproof S. T. C. sent the mournful reply: "You bid me rouse myself. Go bid a man paralytic in both arms to rub them briskly together and that will cure him. 'Alas!' he would reply, 'that I cannot move my arms is my complaint and my misery.'" It was a wounded giant who amidst his troubles physical and mental wrote this kindly letter to Thomas Curnick.

WILLIAM E. A. AXON.

The late Mr. William Edward Armytage Axon was an indefatigable bookman and bibliophile who lived in Manchester. He was born there in 1846, and died there in 1913. He wrote a bibliography of Mrs. Gaskell and was an expert on the Manchester authors, De Quincey and others. This letter, communicated by him to the New York *Nation* together with its accompanying "foreword," seems to me to be worth preserving, as it is a revelation of Coleridge of a singularly interesting character. Sir Walter Scott's famous dictum that literature should be "a staff" but not "a crutch" is here capped almost at the same date by Coleridge's idea that it should stand for "dessert" and not for "dinner."

CLEMENT SHORTER.

To Mr. THOMAS CURNICK.

Dear Sir,

I have been much affected by your letter, and have perused, with considerable pleasure, the poems which accompanied it. But how can I serve you? Gold and silver have I none; but, on the contrary, I am myself sorely embarrassed. Mr. Southey and I married sisters; and I am on terms of intimacy with him. But it was not to Kirke White, but to his family, that Southey could make himself serviceable, by becoming his biographer and editor, after his premature death.

Many thoughts crowded on me during the perusal of your letter, which pressing engagements prevent me communicating at present; but within a short time I will endeavour to perform that most arduous duty of one sympathising Christian to another, that of telling what appears to him to be the truth. O that I could convey to you, in all its liveliness, the anguish of regret which I have a thousand times felt (while obliged, for the bread of the day, to be aiming at excellencies which in the most

favoured natures require health, competence, tranquillity, and genial feelings), that I had not been taught to earn my subsistence mechanically, where, if my fingers were weary, my heart and brain at least were at rest!

From the time of Pope's translation of Homer, inclusive, so countless have been the poetic metamorphoses of almost all possible thoughts and connections of thought, that it is scarcely practicable for a man to write in the ornamental style on any subject without finding his poem, against his will and without his previous consciousness, a cento of lines that had pre-existed in other works; and this it is which makes poetry so very difficult, because so very easy, in the present day. I myself have for many years past given it up in despair.

There is much fire and spirit in your ode on Lord Wellington: and the chief defect is a confusion of mythology. Cherubs have no connection with Mars; and the first stanza is obscure, because the reader does not know whether you mean Lord Wellington or an imaginary god of war. If the latter, the after introduction of the Almighty is irreverent; or (as the painter's phrase is),

"out of keeping." If the former, the ponderous spear, etc., is not translatable into sense and fact. Poetry must be more than good sense, or it is not poetry; but it dare not be less, or disrepant. Good sense is not, indeed, the superstructure; but it is the rock, not only on which the edifice is raised, but likewise the rock-quarry from which all its stones have been, by patient toil, dug out.

The whole of next week I am unfortunately pre-engaged, day after day, and the whole of each day; but, after that, you will generally find me at No. 2, Queen Square, any time from seven in the evening to ten; and if you can point out any mode in which I can be really useful to you, be assured I shall be most ready to attempt it.

Will you forgive a man who has had repeated occasions for mourning that he had not himself pursued the profession of the law (a profession which needs only to be considered in the light of a manly philosophy to present many charms to a thinking mind, and which, beyond all others, gives an insight into the real state of society, the hearts, morals, and passions of our fellow-

creatures) to ask you why a man of genius should despair of making genius effective and illustrious in the pursuit of the profession in which it has pleased Providence to place him? I do not know your age, but you inform me that you are an attorney's clerk. Even such was Garrow—such was Dunning.

Do I advise you to desert the Muses? No! I give no advice which, I know, would be vain, but my experience does warrant me, "with a warning and dolorous blast" (as Milton says) to exhort all men of genius to take care that they should rely on literature only for private pleasure and solace; or, at most, for the dessert to their dinner, not for the dinner itself.

I beg your acceptance of the enclosed ticket, which, should you have leisure or inclination, will admit yourself and a friend to my course of lectures.

With sincere good wishes, yours, dear sir,

S. T. COLERIDGE.

Bristol, 9th April, 1814.

Of this letter, which first appeared in the NATION *(New York) of Aug. 21, 1913, twenty-five copies only have been privately printed by Clement Shorter for distribution among his friends.*

London, March 1st, 1917.

No 2
C.K.S.